

Seventeenth-century Teaching on the Christian Life—1

An Introduction to some Puritan and Roman Moral Theology¹

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The Background

The high-water-mark of both Roman and Reformed thinking on the subject of the Christian life was without doubt reached in the seventeenth century.

Several circumstances combined to bring this about. In the first place, this was a century marked by unusual mental exertion on most subjects; for during it the world-view which we call Medieval was fighting its last desperate battles against the atomistic outlook which we call Modern. The Medieval intellectual ideal was that reason should give itself to building and maintaining a comprehensive synthesis of knowledge in a hierarchy of sciences which theology had designed and over which she reigned as queen. This view was challenged in the sixteenth century by the intellectual ideal of the Renaissance: that of the “universal man”, the natural empiricist, thirsty for experiences, fascinated by his own humanity, but hostile to speculation and defiant towards traditional systems. The seventeenth century saw the old theocentric outlook, which had concerned itself only with the unity of things in God, finally give way to this new anthropocentrism, which stressed the diversity of things in themselves and recognized no unity save that of the experiencing subject. Into the melting-pot, therefore, went the Medieval synthesis; out in its place came such separate items as experimental science, empiricist philosophy, parliamentary democracy and religious toleration. The age in which these things happened was one of mental revolution; and the century’s most striking characteristic was the virility and passion of its thinking, as men grappled with the implications of the new outlook. It was a time of endless controversy, of great polymaths, of vast erudition, of huge books, of projects as ambitious as Cudworth’s *Intellectual System of the Universe*, of arguments as minute as that between Baxter and Owen as to whether Christ’s death paid *idem* or *tantundem* for guilty sinners. It saw notable advances in most fields of knowledge, for the new experimentalism was as fruitful as it was disruptive. And theology was the supreme interest of the seventeenth-century man. The Medieval awareness that all problems about man and the world are ultimately theological still remained with him, and he looked to theology to introduce and guide the discussion of everything else. Indeed, theology was to him a fascinating subject in itself; it was the cultured man’s hobby, and was expected to be, just as novel reading is to-day. All in all, the stage was well set for outstanding theological achievements.

Then, in the second place, three factors caused special attention to be focussed on the subject of the Christian life. The first was the divided state of Christendom. A century earlier, theology and nationalism together had split Christendom, ecclesiastically and politically, into Catholic and Protestant blocs, and Christendom had not yet recovered from the shock; the conflict raged on through the seventeenth century, on the battlefields of Europe, in its pulpits, lecture-rooms and literature, and most of all in the consciences of men and women. For both sides insisted that the question of personal salvation was bound up in the dispute. Everyone had to face the somewhat unnerving fact of two rival groups, each speaking as the Church, each answering the question: “What must I do to be saved?” in a different way, and each

warning that those who took the other view would certainly be lost. Who was right? None dare ignore the issue. All were pondering it; they had to.

The second factor that calls for mention was the new individualism of the Renaissance. This increased the urgency with which this question was borne in upon seventeenth-century minds. The Renaissance gave birth to a spirit of intellectual independence and a sense of the value of personal experience which was felt as a breath of fresh air as long as Christendom continued stable. But when the Church split and the stability of Christendom was shattered, the bright and sunny temper of the early Renaissance gave way to an oppressive sense of the isolation of the individual in an enigmatic, uncertain and perhaps unfriendly world. The seventeenth-century children of the Renaissance found themselves a problem to themselves; they had gained self-consciousness, but they had lost security. Hence came restlessness and doubt. Men's mood grew strained and sombre. Those who stood at the growing-point of the century's consciousness were men with a streak of melancholy in them. The typical seventeenth-century figures are Hamlet, brooding; Descartes in his stove, seeing what he could doubt; Pascal, forcing a bet on God's existence—"You must bet; it is not optional; you have put to sea"; and Bunyan's pilgrim, fingers in ears, running from the City of Destruction "crying Life, Life, Eternal Life". Such men naturally felt a deep longing for what the Puritans called "experimental" religion. They were uncertain, not of the truth of the Gospel, but of their individual "interest" in it; they sought assurance of salvation, and the assurance they desired was that of personal experience. To enjoy peace of conscience and a "comfortable" walk with God was to them the crown of life. And they found no study more fascinating than the drama of the soul's odyssey through life's stormy seas to its eternal destination—in Bunyan's terms, the pilgrim's progress from this world to the next. In England and New England, a generation of preacher-theologians—Greenham, Perkins, Sibbes, Rogers, Hooker, Preston, Goodwin, Cotton, Bolton, Baynes, Whately, Dod, and many others—preached almost exclusively on "the application of redemption", mapping in endless detail the terrain of spiritual experience; and crowds flocked to hear them. In Catholic France, hundreds sought spiritual direction and gave themselves up to the religious life. Everywhere the dramatic conception of life which stemmed from the Renaissance produced an intense and absorbed concern about the theology and practice of personal religion.

The third factor in the situation was that both Roman and Protestant leaders at the end of the sixteenth century had begun to feel a need to think out the doctrine of the Christian life in detail so that the laity might be taught it. The Romans saw this as part of the strategy of the Counter-Reformation, which was planned by its Jesuit generals to recapture seceders, consolidate the faithful, re-establish the Church's authority, and ultimately convert the world. It soon became clear that the faithful could not be effectively consolidated without a thorough training in piety. Lay piety before the Reformation had been a lax, haphazard and superstitious affair, as the Reformers had not failed to point out; now it must be tightened up. Personal religion needed to be organized; the man in the street must be drilled into devotion. Accordingly, the Jesuits pressed upon all Catholics the regular use of the confessional, and wrote for their guidance devotional manuals with titles like *How to Hear Mass . . . with a Scheme for Confessing one's Sins Well* (in French, by Emond Auger, 1571) and *The First Booke of Christian Exercise, Appertayning to Resolution* (in English, by Robert Persons, 1582). Francis de Sales' *Introduction to the Devout Life* is the classic statement of the Jesuit ideal for lay piety.

Protestant leaders also felt the need to study and teach the Christian life, so that they might complete the work of reformation. The original reformers had wished to correct by the word

of God, not merely the Church's faith and order, but also the lives of its pastors and people; but circumstances had not allowed them to make much headway in the second part of their task. It fell to their English successors, the preacher-theologians mentioned above, to take the first decisive steps in it.

We call these men Puritans, using the term as it was used in their own day—as a title given to all who preached and practised serious Calvinistic piety, irrespective of their denominational views. (On this definition, bishops like Hall, Reynolds and Hopkins, and Archbishops Ussher and Leighton, were Puritans; and indeed they were considered such by their own Puritan contemporaries.) Puritan hearts had grown increasingly troubled, as Elizabeth's reign wore on, at the continuance of unreformed national ungodliness in the reformed national church. Clergy and laity were for the most part ignorant and careless. Troubled souls sought instruction in vain. No devotional books were available. "In the production of sound moral treatises, peculiarly fitted to the needs of the conscientious pastor"—and layman—"in England, there had been an unfortunate . . . time-lag after the opening phases of the Reformation" (T. Wood, *English Casuistical Divinity during the Seventeenth Century*, p. 37 f.). The Puritans were specially galled to see how the Jesuits took advantage of this lack to flood the country with their own devotional books. A Puritan churchman, Edmund Bunny, tried to spike the Jesuit guns by producing in 1584 an expurgated version of Persons' *First Booke of Christian Exercise*, and "Bunny on Resolution", as it came to be called, was for a time both popular and influential. But this was at best a stopgap; the Puritans read the situation as a challenge to produce devotional books of their own, and this they did. William Perkins, a Cambridge don, led the way in the eighties and nineties of the sixteenth century with a series of little volumes which sold like hot cakes. It was largely Perkins who, by his books, preaching, and personal influence on undergraduates, inspired and moulded the great Puritan pastoral movement of the early seventeenth century. The first Evangelical revival in England sprang directly from the work of this little-known proto-Simeon; and the classic devotional theology which the Puritans gave the Church was no more than an expansion of Perkins' teaching. The full flowering of Puritan pastoral ideals appeared in Richard Baxter's epic ministry at Kidderminster. Saint, theologian, churchman, schoolmaster and evangelist, Baxter was Puritanism incarnate, the Reformed Pastor in person. He marked the highest point of development in the Puritan pastoral tradition, as did Francis in the parallel tradition of the Counter-Reformation.

Three Teachers

Our aim is to review the teaching of these two seventeenth-century traditions on the Christian life. For this purpose, we shall use the writings of three representative authors, whom we must now briefly introduce. Two have been mentioned already: Francis de Sales and Richard Baxter. The third is another Puritan, John Owen.

Francis de Sales lived from 1567 to 1622, and from 1602 was bishop of Geneva. He won fame as a preacher, and in early life had some success as a missionary to Calvinists, but his reputation was greatest as a spiritual director. In a day when much spiritual direction was clumsy and inhumane, Francis' sane wisdom in dealing with souls set him in a class apart. "Trustfulness, good humour and faith in human nature" are singled out by Kirk as his dominant qualities (*The Vision of God*, p. 408). His writings show a sunny tranquillity of spirit which is most attractive. We shall quote from his two classics, the *Introduction to the Devout Life* (1608) and the *Treatise of the Love of God* (1616). The first does not profess to

be more than a restatement of traditional material. “I certainly neither can, nor wish, nor ought to write in this Introduction,” says Francis in the Preface, “anything but what has been already published by those who have written before me on this subject. The flowers which I offer you are the same as theirs; but the bouquet which I have made of them . . . is made up in a different way”—for, as he goes on to explain, whereas others have given instructions for the life of cloistered devotion, “my intention is to instruct such as live in towns, or families, or at court, and . . . are obliged to lead, as to externals, an ordinary life”. In the second treatise, however, Francis is “addressing those who are far advanced in the spiritual life” (Preface), and it is altogether more original and striking than its predecessor. Bremond calls it “one of the finest books of religious philosophy come down to us from the seventeenth century, perhaps the finest” (*Literary History of the Religious Sentiment in France*, E. Tr., II. 424).

Richard Baxter was born in Shropshire in 1615 and died in 1691. He was converted in his ‘teens (through reading “Bunny on Resolution”, Perkins and Sibbes), ordained in 1638, and called to Kidderminster in 1641. There he remained, apart from a spell as chaplain with the Parliamentary army, till 1660. He never desired to be anything but a minister of the Church of England, but was one of the two thousand Puritan clergy who could not in conscience accept the terms of the Act of Uniformity, and so had to leave his living. From 1662 he was the acknowledged leader and spokesman of the “meer non-conformists” (ejected ministers of his own mind in churchmanship), who formed the greater part of this number. He became the most voluminous British theologian of all time. His “Practical Works”, reprinted by Orme in twenty-two volumes, are only about two-fifths of his total output. The first book he wrote, *The Saints’ Everlasting Rest*, an 800-page quarto which became a best-seller, running to nine editions in as many years, gave him from the outset a position of unchallenged pre-eminence among Puritan devotional writers. Prompted by Archbishop Ussher, he went on to write a series of treatises designed to epitomize the entire contents of Puritan teaching on the Christian life. This series culminated in *A Christian Directory, or, A Sum of Practical Theology, and Cases of Conscience*, a mighty thousand-page folio. Books by Baxter were put into German, French, Dutch, and at least one into Red Indian. The preface to the first collected edition of the “Practical Works” (1707) affirmed:

“There is no Language in which there are more Valuable Treatises of Practical Divinity to be met with, than in ours; And perhaps . . . there are no writings of this Kind . . . that have been more esteem’d abroad, or more bless’d at home . . . than the Practical Works of this Author”. Generally speaking, all that is best in Puritan practical theology is in Baxter, and is stated by him with unequalled shrewdness, precision and force.

John Owen, born in 1616 and educated at Queen’s College, Oxford, rose to eminence under the Long Parliament; after a spell in Ireland as chaplain to Cromwell, he returned to Oxford in 1651 as Dean of Christ Church and became Vice-Chancellor the following year. He had by now exchanged his earlier Presbyterianism for Congregational views, and he led the Independents during the lean years after the Restoration till his death in 1683. He was the most theological of the great Puritans. He was not a popular writer, for he could never be superficial; one finds in all he wrote a degree of reflectiveness and a sustained grappling with biblical material and biblical perspectives that sets him in the very front rank of theologians. He, too, sought to sum up the whole body of Puritan teaching; but whereas Baxter cast it into a set of casuistical treatises, Owen embodied it in a series of dogmatic studies of the work of the Holy Spirit—*Pneumatologia*, *The Work of the Holy Spirit in Prayer*, *A discourse of the Holy Spirit as a Comforter*, and *A discourse of Spiritual Gifts*. These were supplemented by

more directly practical expositions—*Of Indwelling Sin, The Mortification of Sin in Believers, The Grace and Duty of being Spiritually Minded*, and some others; but to Owen's mind the series on the Spirit was his more important contribution. This points to the difference of outlook between Owen and Baxter. Both show deep wisdom and insight in directing the Christian soul, but Baxter is always the pastor expounding and theologizing, Owen the exegete and theologian pastoring. Baxter's approach was determined by the present needs of men; Owen's, by the Trinitarian revelation of God. Baxter takes the Bible to his readers, Owen takes his readers to the Bible; Owen excels in massive, austere exposition, Baxter in pointed, homely application. Owen shows us the theological richness, Baxter the practical worth, of Puritan teaching on the Christian life.

Two Types of Teaching

We are now to survey the teaching of our three seventeenth-century spokesmen. As we saw, they had a common aim and interest in writing of the Christian life; each sought to systematize a developed tradition for the guidance of ordinary laymen. Not that they were slaves to the tradition on which they drew: Francis broke new ground within Catholicism in envisaging a full life of devotion for those engaged in secular callings, as we saw, and Owen and Baxter broke new ground within Protestantism by allowing that under certain circumstances one might lawfully withdraw from the world to a solitary life of contemplation. All three were in fact independent and masterful thinkers of the highest ability; no more impressive or intelligent representatives of either tradition could be found. Our review of their teaching, therefore, should help us to form a judgment as to how far these traditions really are divided on the level of practical teaching. Protestants sometimes suspect that the gap is less here than elsewhere, and, indeed, that Roman devotional teaching is in some respects richer than their own. We think it will appear that in fact the gulf is as wide over practice as over doctrine, simply because practice is determined by doctrine; and that Romanism is as much poorer than the Reformed faith in its views of Christian spirituality as it is in its theology of grace. We shall centre our exposition on three pairs of topics: man and sin; love and faith; authority and prayer.

(i) *Man and sin*

Our three teachers all held in substance the traditional Augustinian anthropology which sees man as an embodied soul, consisting of two chief faculties, mind and will (having as their objects truth and goodness respectively), plus affections and passions (powers of positive and negative emotional response—joy, sorrow, hope, fear, etc.) and the “sensitive appetite” (instinctive, self-regarding physical desire, for food, drink, sleep, etc.). These various human functions form a complex hierarchy; the will rules, in the sense that it initiates action for the attainment of apprehended good, but it is itself dependent on reason and appetite for the apprehension of the good to be attained. Ideally, man's mind would know God, and all things in God; his will would cleave to God; his affections would be God-centred, so that he would hope for and delight in only that which pleased God, and fear only the loss of God; and his sensitive appetite would be so governed by his will, in accordance with reason, that its craving would never be gratified further than was seen to be good and right. But the Fall has deranged man's faculties. Reason is no longer allowed to direct; the sensitive appetite (Augustine's *concupiscentia*) is out of hand, and craves uncontrollably; the affections are inordinate, for they follow its lead; and so does the will. Fallen man thus cannot please God.

The work of grace within him, however, progressively restores and reintegrates his disordered nature; this is the process of sanctification.

But was this disordering of the faculties of the personality all that the Fall meant? Here the two traditions parted company. The Roman Church said yes. Rome held that the “original righteousness” which Adam lost at the Fall was simply his power of integrating himself in and for the practice of goodness. He had previously possessed this power as a *donum superadditum*, a divine gift perfecting nature, but distinct from it, and not organically related to it. In its absence, every man lies under the dominion of concupiscence; but this is due simply to his lack of the integrating principle, not to any corruption of his nature as such. Thus, fallen man, though weak, is still fundamentally good, and all he needs that grace should give him is an infusion of supernatural strength to enable him (if the phrase may be allowed) to pull himself together. This was Francis’ position.

But the Puritans, with the Reformers, insisted that Scripture requires a more radical view: namely, that through the Fall man has come under the dominion of sin. Psychological disintegration is a result of this, but must not be equated with it. For sin is more than a lack; it is essentially an active antipathy to God, an energy of aversion and opposition towards one’s Creator. “The carnal mind is enmity against God” (Rom. viii. 7). And sin expresses itself through every function of human personality, so that the whole man opposes God at every level of his life. The loss of original righteousness thus meant more than the deprivation of man’s inner harmony; fundamentally, it meant the depravation of his entire nature. His depravity is total, for it extends to the whole of him. Human nature is worse than weak; it is bad. The mind is dark, the will is perverse, the affections are inordinate, just because sin reigns throughout. “(Sin’s) nature and formal design,” writes Owen, “is to oppose God: God as a lawgiver, God as holy, God as the author of the gospel”. Ungodliness, unrighteousness and unbelief are therefore its natural modes of self-expression. “It adheres as a depraved principle unto our minds, in darkness and vanity; unto our wills, in a loathing of, and aversion from, that which is good; and . . . is continually putting itself upon us, in inclinations, motions, or suggestions to evil” (Owen, *Of Indwelling Sin: Works*, ed. Goold, VI. 178, 167). And it resists the work of grace from first to last. The hearts and lives of regenerate men are battlefields on which indwelling sin (“the flesh”) tirelessly disputes the supremacy of the Spirit, so that a Christian cannot gratify the one without interference from the other (cf. Gal. v. 17). He finds that sin, though now dethroned and disowned, is by no means destroyed; it remains with him, an unwelcome guest; indeed, it has taken on a life of its own and become his demonic *alter ego*. This, says Owen, is why Paul likens it “to a person, a living person, called the old man, with his faculties and properties, his wisdom, craft, subtlety, strength” (*The Mortification of Sin: Works*, VI. 8). It is always busy (“sin is never less quiet than when it seems to be most quiet”, p. 11), spoiling, more or less, all the good that we would do and trapping us, more or less, into the evil that we would not. This inner conflict and contradiction is peculiar to the regenerate; those under the dominion of sin know nothing of it. But once a man is born again, willy-nilly he finds himself with Paul in the closing verses of Rom. vii, a constant object of assault on himself from within himself; sin is now at war with him, and he must perforce spend the rest of his life in conflict with it. The various phases of this warfare form a major theme with Owen and Baxter.

But Francis never does justice to this side of the Christian life at all. The conflict between flesh and spirit is to him no more than the clash between the irrational craving of concupiscence and the rational will. “Do we not often experience sensual passions which are altogether contrary to the affections of the mind or will which we feel simultaneously?” he

asks; “this is what constitutes the war we daily experience between the spirit and the flesh” (*Treatise*, I. v)—or, as he calls them in the *Introduction* (IV. iii), the superior and inferior parts of the soul. The Christian’s inner conflict is no different in principle from the natural man’s experience of being tempted periodically to disobey his conscience. And all that is needed for victory is resolution and fortitude. Mortification of sin, therefore, involves no more than cultivating temperance in food and sleep and practising other disciplines and abstinences in order to weaken concupiscence and make self-control easier (*Introduction*, III. xxiii). For all that Francis tells us, there is nothing more to the Christian warfare than this. But Baxter and Owen expound mortification as essentially a spiritual discipline of meditation and prayer for which physical austerities can at best be merely preparatory; for its aim is not simply to restrain bad habits and ebullient passions, but to weaken the sinful principle which expresses itself through them. Owen upbraids the Romans for not distinguishing sin from sins; they fail, he says, to see the real enemy, and hence misdirect their mortifications towards the outward symptoms of sin’s presence, instead of going to the root of the trouble. “The Papists can never with all their endeavours truly mortify any one sin . . . they have sundry means to mortify . . . the natural life . . . ; none to mortify lust or corruption.” “The ancient authors of monastical devotion “and their disciples all went wrong here: “attempting rigid mortification they fell upon the natural man, instead of the corrupt old man; upon the body wherein we live, instead of the body of death” (VI. 17f.). Owen would have charged Francis with this mistake, and I think he would be right. It is here that the sunny sentimentalism of Francis’ “devout humanism”, as Bremond calls it, is least biblical and realistic. This whole dimension of Christian experience—the real spiritual warfare, not against physical and temperamental frailties merely, but against the clinging, polluting, insatiable principle of spiritual corruption which Paul terms indwelling sin—is simply missing from his pages; which, for all their charm, elegance and ardour, seem superficial and, indeed, quite objectionably complacent when set beside the rough realities of the “old, coarse gospel” (Wesley’s phrase) as the Puritan warriors expound them.

(To be continued)

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Endnotes:

- 1) Based on a paper read at the 1957 Conference of the Evangelical Fellowship for Theological Literature.